

CHAPTER II

THE SLAYING OF THE BEAR

Leaping from their horses, Ragnar and Steinar came to where I stood, for already I had dismounted and was pointing to the ground, which just here had been swept clear of snow by the wind.

"I see nothing," said Ragnar.

"But I do, brother," I answered; "who study the ways of wild things while you think I am asleep. Look, that moss has been turned over; for it is frozen underneath and pressed up into little mounds between the bear's claws. Also that tiny pool has gathered in the slot of the paw; it is its very shape. The other footprints do not show because of the rock."

Then I went forward a few paces behind some bushes and called out: "Here runs the track, sure enough, and, as I thought, the brute has a split claw; the snow marks it well. Bid the thrall stay with the horses and come you."

They obeyed, and there on the white snow which lay beyond the bush we saw the track of the bear stamped as if in wax.

"A mighty beast," said Ragnar. "Never have I seen its like."

"Aye," exclaimed Steinar, "but an ill place to hunt it in," and he looked doubtfully at the rough gorge, covered with undergrowth, that some hundred yards farther on became dense birch forest. "I think it would be well to ride back to Aar, and return to-morrow morning with all whom we can gather. This is no task for three spears."

By this time I, Olaf, was springing from rock to rock up the gorge, following the bear's track. For my brother's taunts rankled in me and I was determined that I should kill this beast or die and thus show Ragnar that I feared no bear. So I called back to them over my shoulder:

"Aye, go home, it is wisest; but I go on for I have never yet seen one of these white ice-bears alive."

"Now it is Olaf who taunts in his turn," said Ragnar with a laugh. Then they both sprang after me, but always I kept ahead of them.

For the half of a mile or more they followed me out of the scrub into the birch forest, where the snow, lying on the matted boughs of the trees and especially of some firs that were mingled with the birch, made the place gloomy in that low light. Always in front of me ran the huge slots of the bear till at length they brought me to a little forest glade, where some great whirling wind had torn up many trees which had but a poor root-hold on a patch of almost soilless rock.

These trees lay in confusion, their tops, which had not yet rotted, being filled with frozen snow. On the edge of them I paused, having lost the track. Then I went forward again, casting wide as a hound does, while behind came Ragnar and Steinar, walking straight past the edge of the glade, and purposing to meet me at its head. This, indeed, Ragnar did, but Steinar halted because of a crunching sound that caught his ear, and then stepped to the right between two fallen birches to discover its cause. Next moment, as he told me afterwards, he stood frozen, for there behind the boughs of one of the trees was the huge white bear, eating some animal that it had killed. The beast saw him, and, mad with rage at being disturbed, for it was famished after its long journey on the floe, reared itself up on its hind legs, roaring till the air shook. High it towered, its hook-like claws outstretched.

Steinar tried to spring back, but caught his foot, and fell. Well for him was it that he did so, for otherwise the blow which the bear struck would have crushed him to a pulp. The brute did not seem to understand where he had gone--at any rate, it remained upreared and beating at the air. Then a doubt took it, its huge paws sank until it sat like a begging dog, sniffing the wind. At this moment Ragnar came back shouting, and hurled his spear. It stuck in the beast's chest and hung there. The bear began to feel for it with its paws, and, catching the shaft, lifted it to its mouth and champed it, thus dragging the steel from its hide.

Then it bethought it of Steinar, and, sinking down, discovered him, and

tore at the birch tree under which he had crept till the splinters flew from its trunk. Just then I reached it, having seen all. By now the bear had its teeth fixed in Steinar's shoulder, or, rather, in his leathern garment, and was dragging him from under the tree. When it saw me it reared itself up again, lifting Steinar and holding him to its breast with one paw. I went mad at the sight, and charged it, driving my spear deep into its throat. With its other paw it struck the weapon from my hand, shivering the shaft. There it stood, towering over us like a white pillar, and roared with pain and fury, Steinar still pressed against it, Ragnar and I helpless.

"He's sped!" gasped Ragnar.

I thought for a flash of time, and--oh! well do I remember that moment: the huge beast foaming at the jaws and Steinar held to its breast as a little girl holds a doll; the still, snow-laden trees, on the top of one of which sat a small bird spreading its tail in jerks; the red light of evening, and about us the great silences of the sky above and of the lonely forest beneath. It all comes back to me--I can see it now quite clearly; yes, even the bird flitting to another twig, and there again spreading its tail to some invisible mate. Then I made up my mind what to do.

"Not yet!" I cried. "Keep it in play," and, drawing my short and heavy sword, I plunged through the birch boughs to get behind the bear. Ragnar understood. He threw his cap into the brute's face, and then, after it

had growled at him awhile, just as it dropped its great jaws to crunch Steinar, he found a bough and thrust it between them.

By now I was behind the bear, and, smiting at its right leg below the knee, severed the tendon. Down it came, still hugging Steinar. I smote again with all my strength, and cut into its spine above the tail, paralysing it. It was a great blow, as it need to be to cleave the thick hair and hide, and my sword broke in the backbone, so that, like Ragnar, now I was weaponless. The forepart of the bear rolled about in the snow, although its after half was still.

Then once more it seemed to bethink itself of Steinar, who lay unmoving and senseless. Stretching out a paw, it dragged him towards its champing jaws. Ragnar leapt upon its back and struck at it with his knife, thereby only maddening it the more. I ran in and grasped Steinar, whom the bear was again hugging to its breast. Seeing me, it loosed Steinar, whom I dragged away and cast behind me, but in the effort I slipped and fell forward. The bear smote at me, and its mighty forearm--well for me that it was not its claws--struck me upon the side of the head and sent me crashing into a tree-top to the left. Five paces I flew before my body touched the boughs, and there I lay quiet.

I suppose that Ragnar told me what passed after this while I was senseless. At least, I know that the bear began to die, for my spear had pierced some artery in its throat, and all the talk which followed, as well as though I heard it with my ears. It roared and roared, vomiting

blood and stretching out its claws after Steinar as Ragnar dragged him away. Then it laid its head flat upon the snow and died. Ragnar looked at it and muttered:

"Dead!"

Then he walked to that top of the fallen tree in which I lay, and again muttered: "Dead! Well, Valhalla holds no braver man than Olaf the Skald."

Next he went to Steinar and once again exclaimed, "Dead!"

For so he looked, indeed, smothered in the blood of the bear and with his garments half torn off him. Still, as the words passed Ragnar's lips he sat up, rubbed his eyes and smiled as a child does when it awakes.

"Are you much hurt?" asked Ragnar.

"I think not," he answered doubtfully, "save that I feel sore and my head swims. I have had a bad dream." Then his eyes fell on the bear, and he added: "Oh, I remember now; it was no dream. Where is Olaf?"

"Supping with Odin," answered Ragnar and pointed to me.

Steinar rose to his feet, staggered to where I lay, and stared at me stretched there as white as the snow, with a smile upon my face and in

my hand a spray of some evergreen bush which I had grasped as I fell.

"Did he die to save me?" asked Steinar.

"Aye," answered Ragnar, "and never did man walk that bridge in better fashion. You were right. Would that I had not mocked him."

"Would that I had died and not he," said Steinar with a sob. "It is borne in upon my heart that it were better I had died."

"Then that may well be, for the heart does not lie at such a time. Also it is true that he was worth both of us. There was something more in him than there is in us, Steinar. Come, lift him to my back, and if you are strong enough, go on to the horses and bid the thrall bring one of them. I follow."

Thus ended the fight with the great white bear.

Some four hours later, in the midst of a raging storm of wind and rain, I was brought at last to the bridge that spanned the moat of the Hall of Aar, laid like a corpse across the back of one of the horses. They had been searching for us at Aar, but in that darkness had found nothing. Only, at the head of the bridge was Freydisa, a torch in her hand. She glanced at me by the light of the torch.

"As my heart foretold, so it is," she said. "Bring him in," then turned and ran to the house.

They bore me up between the double ranks of stabled kine to where the great fire of turf and wood burned at the head of the hall, and laid me on a table.

"Is he dead?" asked Thorvald, my father, who had come home that night; "and if so, how?"

"Aye, father," answered Ragnar, "and nobly. He dragged Steinar yonder from under the paws of the great white bear and slew it with his sword."

"A mighty deed," muttered my father. "Well, at least he comes home in honour."

But my mother, whose favourite son I was, lifted up her voice and wept. Then they took the clothes from off me, and, while all watched, Freydisa, the skilled woman, examined my hurts. She felt my head and looked into my eyes, and laying her ear upon my breast, listened for the beating of my heart.

Presently she rose, and, turning, said slowly:

"Olaf is not dead, though near to death. His pulses flutter, the light

of life still burns in his eyes, and though the blood runs from his ears, I think the skull is not broken."

When she heard these words, Thora, my mother, whose heart was weak, fainted for joy, and my father, untwisting a gold ring from his arm, threw it to Freydisa.

"First the cure," she said, thrusting it away with her foot. "Moreover, when I work for love I take no pay."

Then they washed me, and, having dressed my hurts, laid me on a bed near the fire that warmth might come back to me. But Freydisa would not suffer them to give me anything save a little hot milk which she poured down my throat.

For three days I lay like one dead; indeed, all save my mother held Freydisa wrong and thought that I was dead. But on the fourth day I opened my eyes and took food, and after that fell into a natural sleep. On the morning of the sixth day I sat up and spoke many wild and wandering words, so that they believed I should only live as a madman.

"His mind is gone," said my mother, and wept.

"Nay," answered Freydisa, "he does but return from a land where they

speaking another tongue. Thorvald, bring hither the bear-skin."

It was brought and hung on a frame of poles at the end of the niche in which I slept, that, as was usual among northern people, opened out of the hall. I stared at it for a long while. Then my memory came back and I asked:

"Did the great beast kill Steinar?"

"No," answered my mother, who sat by me. "Steinar was sore hurt, but escaped and now is well again."

"Let me see him with my own eyes," I said.

So he was brought, and I looked on him. "I am glad you live, my brother," I said, "for know in this long sleep of mine I have dreamed that you were dead"; and I stretched out my wasted arms towards him, for I loved Steinar better than any other man.

He came and kissed me on the brow, saying:

"Aye, thanks to you, Olaf, I live to be your brother and your thrall till the end."

"My brother always, not my thrall," I muttered, for I was growing tired. Then I went to sleep again.

Three days later, when my strength began to return, I sent for Steinar and said:

"Brother, Iduna the Fair, whom you have never seen, my betrothed, must wonder how it fares with me, for the tale of this hurt of mine will have reached Lesso. Now, as there are reasons why Ragnar cannot go, and as I would send no mean man, I pray you to do me a favour. It is that you will take a boat and sail to Lesso, carrying with you as a present from me to Athalbrand's daughter the skin of that white bear, which I trust will serve her and me as a bed-covering in winter for many a year to come. Tell her, thanks be to the gods and to the skill of Freydisa, my nurse, I live who all thought must die, and that I trust to be strong and well for our marriage at the Spring feast which draws on. Say also that through all my sickness I have dreamed of none but her, as I trust that sometimes she may have dreamed of me."

"Aye, I'll go," answered Steinar, "fast as horses' legs and sails can carry me," adding with his pleasant laugh: "Long have I desired to see this Iduna of yours, and to learn whether she is as beautiful as you say; also what it is in her that Ragnar hates."

"Be careful that you do not find her too beautiful," broke in Freydisa, who, as ever, was at my side.

"How can I if she is for Olaf?" answered Steinar, smiling, as he left

the place to make ready for his journey to Lesso.

"What did you mean by those words, Freydisa?" I asked when he was gone.

"Little or much," she replied, shrugging her shoulders. "Iduna is lovely, is she not, and Steinar is handsome, is he not, and of an age when man seeks woman, and what is brotherhood when man seeks woman and woman beguiles man?"

"Peace to your riddles, Freydisa. You forget that Iduna is my betrothed and that Steinar was fostered with me. Why, I'd trust them for a week at sea alone."

"Doubtless, Olaf, being young and foolish, as you are; also that is your nature. Now here is the broth. Drink it, and I, whom some call a wise woman and others a witch, say that to-morrow you may rise from this bed and sit in the sun, if there is any."

"Freydisa," I said when I had swallowed the broth, "why do folk call you a witch?"

"I think because I am a little less of a fool than other women, Olaf. Also because it has not pleased me to marry, as it is held natural that all women should do if they have the chance."

"Why are you wiser, and why have you not married, Freydisa?"

"I am wiser because I have questioned things more than most, and to those who question answers come at last. And I am not married because another woman took the only man I wanted before I met him. That was my bad luck. Still, it taught me a great lesson, namely, how to wait and meanwhile to acquire understanding."

"What understanding have you acquired, Freydisa? For instance, does it tell you that our gods of wood and stone are true gods which rule the world? Or are they but wood and stone, as sometimes I have thought?"

"Then think no more, Olaf, for such thoughts are dangerous. If Leif, your uncle, Odin's high priest, heard them, what might he not say or do? Remember that whether the gods live or no, certainly the priest lives, and on the gods, and if the gods went, where would the priest be? Also, as regards these gods--well, whatever they may or may not be, at least they are the voices that in our day speak to us from that land whence we came and whither we go. The world has known millions of days, and each day has its god--or its voice--and all the voices speak truth to those who can hear them. Meanwhile, you are a fool to have sent Steinar bearing your gift to Iduna. Or perhaps you are very wise. I cannot say as yet. When I learn I will tell you."

Then again she shrugged her shoulders and left me wondering what she meant by her dark sayings. I can see her going now, a wooden bowl in her hand, and in it a horn spoon of which the handle was cracked longways,

and thus in my mind ends all the scene of my sickness after the slaying of the white bear.

The next thing that I remember is the coming of the men of Agger. This cannot have been very long after Steinar went to Lesso, for he had not yet returned. Being still weak from my great illness, I was seated in the sun in the shelter of the house, wrapped up in a cloak of deerskins--for the northern wind blew bitter. By me stood my father, who was in a happy mood now he knew that I should live and be strong again.

"Steinar should be back by now," I said to him. "I trust that he has come by no ill."

"Oh no," answered my father carelessly. "For seven days the wind has been high, and doubtless Athalbrand fears to let him sail from Lesso."

"Or perhaps Steinar finds Athalbrand's hall a pleasant place to bide in," suggested Ragnar, who had joined us, a spear in his hand, for he had come in from hunting. "There are good drink and bright eyes there."

I was about to answer sharply, since Ragnar stung me with his bitter talk of Steinar, of whom I knew him to be somewhat jealous, because he thought I loved my foster-brother more than I did him, my brother. Just then, however, three men appeared through trees that grew about the

hall, and came towards the bridge, whereon Ragnar's great wolfhounds, knowing them for strangers, set up a furious baying and sprang forward to tear them. By the time the beasts were caught and quelled, these men, aged persons of presence, had crossed the bridge and were greeting us.

"This is the hall of Thorvald of Aar, is it not? And a certain Steinar dwells here with him, does he not?" asked their spokesman.

"It is, and I am Thorvald," answered my father. "Also Steinar has dwelt here from his birth up, but is now away from home on a visit to the lord Athalbrand of Lesso. Who are you, and what would you of Steinar, my fosterling"

"When you have told us the story of Steinar we will tell you who we are and what we seek," answered the man, adding: "Fear not, we mean him no harm, but rather good if he is the man we think."

"Wife," called my father, "come hither. Here are men who would know the story of Steinar, and say that they mean him good."

So my mother came, and the men bowed to her.

"The story of Steinar is short, sirs," she said. "His mother, Steingerdi, who was my cousin and the friend of my childhood, married the great chief Hakon, of Agger, two and twenty summers gone. A year later, just before Steinar was born, she fled to me here, asking shelter

of my lord. Her tale was that she had quarrelled with Hakon because another woman had crept into her place. Finding that this tale was true, and that Hakon had treated her ill indeed, we gave her shelter, and here her son Steinar was born, in giving birth to whom she died--of a broken heart, as I think, for she was mad with grief and jealousy. I nursed him with my son Olaf yonder, and as, although he had news of his birth, Hakon never claimed him, with us he has dwelt as a son ever since. That is all the tale. Now what would you with Steinar?"

"This Lady. The lord Hakon and the three sons whom that other woman you tell of bore him ere she died--for after Steingerdi's death he married her--were drowned in making harbour on the night of the great gale eighteen days ago."

"That is the day when the bear nearly killed Steinar," I interrupted.

"Well for him, then, young sir, that he escaped this bear, for now, as it seems to us, he is the lord of all Hakon's lands and people, being the only male left living of his issue. This, by the wish of the head men of Agger, where is Hakon's hall, we have come to tell him, if he still lives, since by report he is a goodly man and brave--one well fitted to sit in Hakon's place.

"Is the heritage great?" asked my father.

"Aye, very great, Lord. In all Jutland there was no richer man than

Hakon."

"By Odin!" exclaimed my father, "it seems that Steinar is in Fortune's favour. Well, men of Agger, enter and rest you. After you have eaten we will talk further of these matters."

It was just then that, appearing between the trees on the road that ran to Fladstrand and to the sea, I saw a company mounted upon horses. In front was a young woman, wrapped in a coat of furs, talking eagerly to a man who rode by her. Behind, clad in armour, with a battle-axe girt about him, rode another man, big and fork-bearded, who stared about him gloomily, and behind him again ten or twelve thralls and seamen.

One glance was enough for me. Then I sprang up, crying:

"Iduna's self, and with her my brother Steinar, the lord Athalbrand and his folk. A happy sight indeed!" And I would have run forward to meet them.

"Yes, yes," said my mother; "but await them here, I pray you. You are not yet strong, my son." And she flung her arms about me and held me.

Presently they were at the bridge, and Steinar, springing from his horse, lifted Iduna from her saddle, a sight at which I saw my mother frown. Then I would no longer be restrained, but ran forward, crying greetings as I came, and, seizing Iduna's hand, I kissed it. Indeed, I

would have kissed her cheek also, but she shrank back, saying:

"Not before all these folk, Olaf."

"As you will," I answered, though just then a chill struck me, which, I thought to myself, came doubtless from the cold wind. "It will be the sweeter afterwards," I added as gaily as I could.

"Yes," she said hurriedly. "But, Olaf, how white and thin you are. I had hoped to find you well again, though, not knowing how it fared with you, I came to see with my own eyes."

"That is good of you," I muttered as I turned to grasp Steinar's hand, adding: "I know well who it was that brought you here."

"Nay, nay," she said. "I came of myself. But my father waits you, Olaf."

So I went to where the lord Athalbrand Fork-beard was dismounting, and greeted him, lifting my cap.

"What!" grumbled Athalbrand, who seemed to be in an ill temper, "are you Olaf? I should scarcely have known you again, lad, for you look more like a wisp of hay tied on a stick than a man. Now that the flesh is off you I see you lack bone, unlike some others," and he glanced at the broad-shouldered Steinar. "Greeting to you, Thorvald. We are come here through a sea that nearly drowned us, somewhat before the appointed

time, because--well, because, on the whole, I thought it best to come. I pray Odin that you are more glad to see us than I am to see you."

"If so, friend Athalbrand, why did you not stop away?" asked my father, firing up, then adding quickly: "Nay, no offence; you are welcome here, whatever your humour, and you too, my daughter that is to be, and you, Steinar, my fosterling, who, as it chances, are come in a good hour."

"How's that, Lord?" asked Steinar absently, for he was looking at Iduna.

"Thus, Steinar: These men"--and he pointed to the three messengers--"have but just arrived from Agger with the news that your father, Hakon, and your half-brothers are all drowned. They say also that the folk of Agger have named you Hakon's heir, as, indeed, you are by right of blood."

"Is that so?" exclaimed Steinar, bewildered. "Well, as I never saw my father or my brothers, and they treated me but ill, I cannot weep for them."

"Hakon!" broke in Athalbrand. "Why, I knew him well, for in my youth we were comrades in war. He was the wealthiest man in Jutland in cattle, lands, thralls and stored gold. Young friend, your luck is great," and he stared first at Steinar, then at Iduna, pulling his forked beard and muttering words to himself that I could not catch.

"Steinar gets the fortune he deserves," I exclaimed, embracing him.

"Not for nothing did I save you from the bear, Steinar. Come, wish my foster-brother joy, Iduna."

"Aye, that I do with all my heart," she said. "Joy and long life to you, and with them rule and greatness, Steinar, Lord of Agger," and she curtsied to him, her blue eyes fixed upon his face.

But Steinar turned away, making no answer. Only Ragnar, who stood by, burst into a loud laugh. Then, putting his arm through mine, he led me into the hall, saying:

"This wind is over cold for you, Olaf. Nay, trouble not about Iduna. Steinar, Lord of Agger, will care for her, I think."

That night there was a feast at Aar, and I sat at it with Iduna by my side. Beautiful she was indeed in her garment of blue, over which streamed her yellow hair, bright as the gold rings that tinkled on her rounded arms. She was kind to me also, and bade me tell her the story of the slaying of the bear, which I did as best I could, though afterwards Ragnar told it otherwise, and more fully. Only Steinar said little or nothing, for he seemed to be lost in dreams.

I thought that this was because he felt sad at the news of the death of his father and brethren, since, although he had never known them, blood still calls to blood; and so, I believe, did most there present. At any

rate my father and mother tried to cheer him and in the end bade the men of Agger draw near to tell him the tale of his heritage.

They obeyed, and set out all their case, of which the sum was that Steinar must now be one of the wealthiest and most powerful men of the northern lands.

"It seems that we should all take off our caps to you, young lord," said Athalbrand when he heard this tale of rule and riches. "Why did you not ask me for my fair daughter?" he added with a half-drunken laugh, for all the liquor he had swallowed had got a hold of his brain. Recovering himself, he went on: "It is my will, Thorvald, that Iduna and this snipe of an Olaf of yours should be wed as soon as possible. I say that they shall be wed as soon as possible, since otherwise I know not what may happen."

Then his head fell forward on the table and he sank to sleep.